



**MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND  
HEALTH, FINLAND**

## **Promoting Children's Welfare in the Nordic Countries**

### **Early childhood education and care**

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a service for children below compulsory school age that involves elements of both physical care and education (socialization as well as cognitive stimulation) (OECD 2006). ECEC services may be publicly funded and delivered, publicly funded and privately delivered, or privately funded and delivered, and tend to be heavily subsidized by government in most countries.

Current ECEC programmes evolved out of multiple streams for the purpose of such things as child protection, early childhood education, helping children with special needs, facilitating mothers' labour force participation, and enhancing children's development. These programmes began more than a century ago as a service linked to private charity and child protection and evolved as a public responsibility largely after World War II. The major expansions in these programmes date from the 1970s.

Though the comprehensiveness and levels vary, all Western European countries have direct income transfers to families with children, but few other countries have as extensive social services for families with children as the Nordic countries (Kvist 1998,

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169). Social services for families with children are even considered “the key to the Nordic welfare model” (Sipilä 1997). Extensive public daycare systems favour mothers’ labour market participation and are therefore a major factor in the realisation of economic gender equality. In the Nordic countries ECEC services are most often publicly funded and delivered. That relates also to child care in private homes where the municipalities collect fees from the parents, and in turn pay the care providers.

### Access, quality and cost

In comparing ECEC it is important to focus not only on the availability of or access to daycare services but also on the quality and cost of the services. Kangas and Rostgaard (2007) provide most commensurate data on these three areas of ECEC in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden (Table 3a and 3b)<sup>1</sup>.

Table 3a. Day care architecture children 0-2 years, 2002 or most recent years.

		Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
Availability	Day care guarantee for child 0-2 years (yes=1 and no=0)	1	1	0	1
	% of children in FTE* day care of children in day care 0-2 years	56,1	21	26,6	42,9
	Social expenditure for day care in EURO, ppp per child 0-school age, 0,66 of total budget for children 0-school age	11011	12387	..	7393
Cost	Parental fee, percent of total cost	29	20	26	13
	Parental payment, child 1 year, as per cent of income for APW	14,7	8,8	10,1	5,7
Standards	Staff:child ratio (full-time staff to full-time places, excl. administrative staff)	2,6	3,8	3,9	5,4
	Weekly opening hours	50	50	50	52,5
	Yearly opening hours (yes=1, no=0.75)	1	1	1	1
	Staff education (% with qualification)	50	..	49	98

\* Full-time equivalent.

Source: Kangas and Rostgaard (2007).

Table 3b. Day care architecture children 3-school age, 2002 or most years.

		Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
Availability	Day care guarantee for child 3-school age (yes=1 and no=0)	1	1	0	1
	% of children in FTE* day care 3-school age	92,2	59	51,9	94,1
	Social expenditure for day care in DKK, ppp per child 0-school age	5505	6193	..	3697
Cost	Parental fees, percent of total cost	30	20	26	13
	Parental payment for 3-school year child, as per cent of income for APW	10,6	8,8	10,1	3,6
Quality	Staff:child ratio (full-time staff to full-time places, excl administrative staff)	5,3	3,8	3,9	5,41
	Weekly opening hours	50	50	50	52,5
	Yearly opening hours (yes=1, no=0.75)	1	1	1	1
	Staff education (% of staff with qualifying education and training,	60	..	49	98

\* Full-time equivalent.

Source: Kangas and Rostgaard 2007.

The comparison shows that Sweden and Denmark have the highest share of children (0-2 years) in public daycare. The share is the lowest in Finland despite the fact that there is a daycare guarantee. In Norway the comparatively low participation rate may be explained by the absence of a daycare guarantee.

Cash for child care schemes (child home care allowance schemes) offer another explanation (see also Table 4). The share of children in public daycare increases dramatically in Norway and in Finland as soon as the children turn three years. That is the age limit for cash for child care. Kangas and Rostgaard (2007) calculated a care index, which gave the highest ranking for Sweden among the children less than two years, and for Finland among the children between three years and school age. In the first category Sweden was followed by Denmark, Finland and Norway, which indicates that Sweden has the most developed child care system for children under three. In the second

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category, i.e. the care for children between three years and six years, Finland took the top position, while Sweden came second and Denmark third. Norway came last position in the comparison of the Nordic countries.

Table 4. ECEC architecture in the Nordic countries.

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Compulsory School Age	7	7	6	6	7
Funding, % of GDP (information from OECD 2006)	2,1	1,1	.. *	1,7	1,9
Legal entitlement to day care	Yes (for children above 6 months)	Yes	No	Under preparation	Yes
Legal entitlement to free service	6 years (some cases 4y 10m)	6 years (full day)	No (yes for some municipalities)	6 years	4 years (some cases 3 years, 15 hours per week)
Rate of acces, % from early 2000's					
0-1	12	..	7,5	..	..
1-2	83	27,5	58,3	48	45
2-3	83	43,9	92,4	48	86
3-4	94	62,3	94,5	88	91
4-5	94	68,5	95,4	88	..
5-6	98	73	93,2	88	96
6-7 (including pre-school)	98	Almost 100	0,1	0	91
Child-staff ratios					
0-2	3,3	..	..	..	..
3-5	7,2	..	..	..	..
0-3	..	4	..	7-9	..
3-	..	7	..	14-18 (+ non trained staff)	..

\*Information not available (..).

Iceland was not included in the above-mentioned study. The availability of public daycare has improved considerably in Iceland during the early 2000s. In all age categories Iceland has the highest share of children in public daycare among the Nordic countries. The difference is clearest in the two-to-three year age group.

In 2001 OECD started publishing the *Starting Strong* series (OECD 2001, 2006). The reports include information on ECEC eligibility, coverage, funding, policy-making authority, delivery strategies, curricula, etc. *Starting Strong* (OECD 2001) and *Starting Strong II* (OECD 2006) country profiles are available for Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden.

Information from Starting Strong reports (OECD 2001, 2006) and responses to the questionnaire demonstrate significant similarities

in ECEC architecture across the Nordic countries (Table 4). The compulsory school age is seven years (DK, FI, SW) or six years (IC, NO). All the countries invest heavily on ECEC with Denmark having the highest share of funding in relation to GDP, i.e. 2.1% of GDP.

With regard to universalism, the major issue concerns the legal entitlement to daycare. In Finland, all children under three were granted the subjective right to daycare in 1990. The guarantee was expanded in 1996 to all children under school age. This meant that municipalities were obliged by law to provide daycare for every child under school age. Finland was the first country in the world to implement such a subjective right, but Sweden very soon followed suit (Hiilamo 2002: Anttonen and Sipilä 2000, 128–129). However, Sweden restricted access to daycare for families who were unemployed or studying or on parental leave. Once these regulations were finally removed daycare services become universal in the strict sense of the word.

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under preparation in Norway. In Iceland it was discussed and proposed in the 1990s but the new daycare Act did not include legal entitlement. Since then the issue has not been revived. However, a new law is under preparation.

It needs to be emphasised that daycare is affordable in all the Nordic countries, compared for instance to Great Britain (OECD 2005). According to Kangas and Rostgaard (2007) daycare is clearly the least expensive for parents in Sweden where the parents share of total costs is only 5.7% for children between 0-2 years and 3.6% for children from three years to school age. (Tables 3a, 3b.)

### Quality and staffing

Daycare staffs have higher qualifications in Sweden, though. Half of them hold qualifications in pedagogical education while the other half has no such education or only one year of it. In Norway the staff qualifications apply only to those with pedagogical education. According to regulations in Finland, one third of the staff must have either a university degree in pedagogical studies or at least three years of pedagogical education, for instance from a polytechnic. Other staff members in daycare centres must have a suitable secondary vocational education (three years).

Another indicator for the quality of daycare is the maximum group size in daycare centres (Table 4). The smaller the group, the more attention is given to each child. There are no legal regulations on maximum group sizes in the Nordic countries. In Finland there are regulations in the daycare decree concerning the ratio between staff and children in daycare centres. In family daycare the group size is regulated. There are also similar regulations in Norway. In Denmark there are regulations in family daycare. There are no major differences across the Nordic countries concerning opening times.

A recommendation on maximum group sizes concerns only preschool education for six-year-old children in Finland. The lack of information from reports to the OECD's *Starting Strong* indicates that child-staff ratios are the lowest in Denmark (Table 4). The lower the ratio, the more personnel there is for each child.

What is most striking is that the expansion of daycare in the early 1990s in Finland and Sweden took place at a time of aus-

terity, when cutbacks were implemented in many other areas of social support in both countries (Hiilamo 2002). However, in practice the number of places in daycare almost met the demand even before the reforms. The share of children under school-age in public daycare increased only modestly in both countries (Hiilamo 2006, Nyberg 2004). Despite statutory reforms, public gross expenditure on daycare fell in both countries during the 1990s due to higher rates of unemployment (Hiilamo 2002, 208-209).

### **Jurisdictional differences**

The legal entitlement to free service refers to preschool activities, which fall under the domain of education. It is difficult to compare preschool activities across the Nordic countries. In Sweden daycare is called irrespective of children age “*förskola*”, i.e. preschool. daycare comes under the domain of education in Sweden, Norway and Iceland. The guarantee for free service is reserved for six-year-old children in Finland and Denmark (with exceptional cases four years and 10 months) while in Sweden the age limit is four years (or three years for exceptional cases, e.g. second-language children). In Sweden there is free preschool for four-year-old children (540 hours a year). There is a plan to extend the free service of 15 hours a week to three year olds.

In Norway and in Iceland the compulsory school age is six years. In Iceland all the larger local municipalities operate preschools, but this does not mean that all children are able to attend preschool. Demand for places, in some municipalities, is far greater than the municipalities can meet. The preschool Act in Iceland does, however, state that the local authorities are obliged to take the initiative in ensuring places for children in high quality preschools.

The most interesting difference across the Nordic countries is the national authority for ECEC. In Denmark ECEC fall under the auspice of the Ministry of Family and Consumer Affairs (earlier Ministry of Social Affairs), while in Finland the authority comes under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. However, in Finland some municipalities have given the authority for daycare and school activities within the municipal administration to the same department.

The educational function of daycare has been emphasised in Sweden since Alva Myrdal's times. The Ministry of Education and Research has been responsible for ECEC in Sweden since 1998. Before, it was under the Ministry of Social Affairs. In Iceland the Ministry of Education has been responsible for daycare institutions since 1973 (Broddadottir et al. 1997). The arrangements in Norway resemble those in Sweden. The national authority was removed from Ministry of Family Affair to the Ministry of Education and Research in 2006. The variety in the agencies with national authority is not reflected on supervision of ECEC. The operating responsibility is decentralised and lies with the municipalities.

The fact that the municipalities with autonomous powers supervise public daycare may result in unequal standards. The *Starting Strong* report by Sweden states that there is a problem of disparity in the quality of daycare across municipalities (OECD 2001). The strong role of municipalities also prevents or inhibits the national authorities from collecting detailed information on daycare (a problem which was highlighted also in the course of data collection for this study). For this reason it is difficult or even impossible to obtain comprehensive information on municipal daycare fee schedules or average group sizes. There are national fee schedules e.g. in Finland, while in Sweden only the fee ceiling is set nationally.

### **Involvement of parents and families**

An upcoming issue in reforming the ECEC concerns the involvement of parents and children in developing services. The Nordic countries seem to apply largely different approaches to this issue.

Parents seem to have the strongest role in Denmark and in Norway. In Denmark parents have the right to be represented in a parents' committee. Within the goals and framework defined by the municipal council, the committee is competent to influence three areas:

- The principles according to which the educational activities in day-care are to be conducted
- The principles of budget spending. The parents' committee decides the principles according to which financial means are spent, e.g. special kinds of toys, furniture, or outings etc.



- The right to nominate and participate when the leader of day-care centre is to be employed. The right to nominate when the staffs of daycare is to be employed.

In Norway the new Kindergarten Act from 2005 give both children and parents a legal right to participation. Section 3 Children's Right to Participation states 'Children in kindergartens shall have the right to express their views on the day-to day activities of the kindergarten. Children shall regularly be given opportunity to take an active part in planning and assessing the activities of the kindergarten. The children's views shall be given due weight according to their age and maturity.'

**In Iceland preschool directors are obliged to promote collaboration between the parents of the children attending the schools and the staff of the preschools, with the welfare of the children as the guiding principle.**

According to Norwegian Kindergarten Act Section 4 all kindergartens must have a parents' council and a coordinating committee where the parents are represented. The coordinating committee shall be an advisory, contact-promoting and coordinating body. According to Section 2 the coordinating committee shall establish an annual plan for the pedagogical activities on the basis of the framework plan for kindergartens. The Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens gives further instructions concerning these topics.

In Iceland the involvement of parents is defined in the preschool arrangements for children under compulsory school age. Preschool directors are obliged to promote collaboration between the parents of the children attending the schools and the staff of the preschools, with the welfare of the children as the guiding principle. If the parents want to establish a parents' society, the preschool director shall assist with its establishment. The national curriculum guide for preschools states that a period of adaptation for each child has to be arranged in consultation with parents. Parents must provide the preschool teacher with information on the child's circumstances while themselves learning about the activities of the preschool. Parents should also have the opportunity to discuss the child's situation with a preschool teacher if they

so request. Parents and families should occasionally be invited to pay special visit to the preschool, for instance in connection with presentations and celebrations at the preschool.

In all the countries there are fewer initiatives concerning the involvement of children in developing ECEC services. Both Denmark and Norway state in their responses to questionnaire that children are “expected to play a participatory role”. In Finland the emphasis is on the cooperation between the parent and the daycare personnel through regular consultations. The parent and child involvement in developing ECEC seems to be the weak point of daycare in Sweden (OECD 2001). New regulations are under preparation.

### **Inclusion**

Children with special needs in ECEC are a detailed issue and our comparison does not include differences within the Nordic countries. The policy of inclusion exists in all the Nordic countries. It seems that children with disabilities or children with special needs are at the same time helped to get into the mainstream daycare and are given priority for special services. In some cases special daycare groups or centres are available.

Children from linguistic and/or cultural minorities are offered language stimulation. In Denmark it is mandatory for local authorities to offer language stimulation activities to bilingual children from three years (OECD 2006). The activities mostly take the form of intensified Danish language coaching in kindergarten and in the first year of primary education. If the children are not in the public daycare system, 15 hours per week of Danish language coaching may be offered in homes. In Norway government funds are made available for language stimulus.

In Finland the municipalities in which there is a concentration of immigrants make policy to support immigrant families and to make experimental programmes for them. Some daycare centres specialize in multicultural education. The approach is coupled with encouraging the participation of persons with multicultural backgrounds in pedagogical education. However no government funds are made available for this purpose.

The curriculum for preschool in Sweden states that those children who do not have Swedish as their native language should

be given support to develop their cultural identity and communication capabilities both in Swedish and in their own language. The government has made funds available to provide a free daily three-hour session of daycare for bilingual children from three years. An evaluation report revealed the disparities in the quality of special services in ECEC across Swedish municipalities (OECD 2006).

The major problem is that families from linguistic and/or cultural minorities do not bring their children to public daycare as often as the majority of parents. The most common approach is to make the option for public daycare more attractive by offering services free of charge. Low-income families are also offered free services for at least a couple of hours a day.

Early intervention applies to children who are discovered to have or be at risk of developing a handicap or other special need that may affect their development. Early intervention consists in the provision of services such children and their families for the purpose of lessening the effects of the condition. Early intervention is familiar as a concept in all the Nordic countries. Early intervention programmes aim to make intervention in the early years in order to prevent the development of subsequent problems. This approach is applied in Denmark and in Finland. In Denmark early support is given within the daycare systems. If the support proves inadequate, the child is given special assistance. In Iceland early intervention is focused on infants.

Improving the quality of and access to ECEC has also become a major policy in the Nordic countries. That holds true especially for Norway, where the legal entitlement to daycare aimed to achieve full coverage by the end of 2007.

The Norwegian government presented a “White Paper on Early Intervention for Lifelong Learning” (Report No. 16 [2006-2007]) in spring 2007. The goals of the report relate to diminishing class distinctions, reducing economic inequity and combating poverty and other forms of marginalisation. According to the White Paper, the government has the following measures in ECEC:

- Ensure that all children who need it are offered language stimulation before starting school
- Follow-up project for children with delayed language development

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- Pilot project with ambulatory teachers
- Full kindergarten provision by the end of 2007
- Right to a place in kindergarten
- Pilot project to test free services for a part of the day in kindergarten.

There are differences in the availability of open services (open daycare centres, play groups, day clubs, family clubs, play parks organized by the municipality or by NGOs). According to the information supplied by the national informants, these services seem to be most developed in Finland and in Sweden. In Finland the Evangelical Lutheran congregations make a major contribution in providing open services. Some 40% of children between three and six years attend open services operated by the Church. In Sweden the open preschool (*öppnaförskolan*) is an alternative to regular preschool for the children of parents who are at home during the day. It also supplements family daycare. Together with their parents or municipal childminders, children are invited to take part in a pedagogical group activity. In some housing areas, open preschools collaborate with public bodies like the social welfare services and the maternity care and child health care services. The children are not registered and are not required to attend regularly. Most open preschools are free of charge.

The programme philosophies in ECEC are also generally similar across the Nordic countries. ECEC combine care, education and teaching. ECEC is a systematic and goal oriented interaction and collaboration, where the child's spontaneous play is of key importance. The national curricula provide the framework for the local plans and activities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we may note that the major cross-Nordic differences have to do with such variables as: legal entitlement to daycare, administrative auspice (education, health, social welfare or a combination), parent and child involvement in developing services and the availability of open services. There are no major differences in the locus of care. All the Nordic countries rely heavily on public daycare arrangements.

However, Finland and Norway with cash benefits for their child care systems offer the option for parents with small chil-

dren (less than three years) to stay at home. A large number of mothers use this option at least for the part of the period before their youngest child turns three years. In Norway, cash for the child care scheme will be restructured or removed in 2008, while Sweden plans to introduce cash benefit for child care on municipal level. In Iceland the cash benefit for child care has been implemented in some municipalities (Eydal 2007). The eligibility and the level of benefit differ from municipality to municipality.

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*This article is an excerpt from the Reports of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2008:15) by Heikki Hiilamo. The entire paper may be accessed at <http://www.stm.fi/Resource.phx/publishing/documents/15061/index.htx>.*

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Availability was measured by three indicators:

- 1) The share of the age group in daycare, measured in full-time equivalents
- 2) Whether there is a public guarantee of daycare provision for the age group in question
- 3) Social expenditure for daycare in the country, given in purchasing power parity per capita for children aged 0-school age. (Two thirds of expenditure was attributed to children aged 0-2 years, as they attend the most costly daycare with a higher staff ratio and smaller group sizes.)

Price of daycare services was measured by:

- 1) Parents' share of total child care costs;
- 2) The cost of the fee to the parent as the proportion of the net income for an average fulltime production worker (APW) who lives in a two-parent family. (For the calculation of the daycare cost for a small child, the authors awarded him/her with a 1-year old child. For the calculation of the daycare cost of an older child, he/she is awarded with a preschool child aged 4 years old.)

Quality of daycare services was measured by four indicators:

- 1) The staff-child ratio (how many grown-ups are available per child);

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- 2) Staff education (reflects the quality of the interaction with and responsiveness towards the children);
- 3) Weekly opening hours;
- 4) Whether there is daycare available throughout the year or only during the school term, both measured for the daycare schemes with highest take-up of children.

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